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ABSTRACT

The paper presents and demonstrates a heuristic for helping students learn how to read and understand figuration in literature. The heuristic contains elements from linguistics, New Criticism, and rhetorical analysis in a recursive process which enables students to see how features of words combine into figurative patterns. Beginning at the level of the word and using John Milton's "Lycidas" as an example, the paper shows how syntactic and semantic features of two words interact to produce new meanings which then interact to create larger figures through repeated patterns. The paper points out that the heuristic also emphasizes the importance of context in determining the meanings of figures and fictions. Three figures are included. (Author/MS)

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Facts, Figures, and Fictions:

A Heuristic for Reading and Teaching Figuration

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by

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Abstract:

The article presents and demonstrates a heuristic for helping students learn how to read and understand figuration in literature. The heuristic contains elements from linguistics, New Criticism, and rhetorical analysis in a recursive process which enables students to see how features of words combine into figurative patterns. Beginning at the level of the word, the article shows how syntactic and semantic features of two words interact to produce new meanings which then interact to create larger figures through repeated patterns. The heuristic also emphasizes the importance of context in determining the meanings of figures and fictions.

Annie Dillard argues that the best readings of literature are "by consensus, probable, workable, and fruitful."[1] We see the truth of her observation easily: we analyze and synthesize and draw on our own experience as we read in order to make coherent, insightful meaning. We also trust that our reading will be a response to the text and that we have entered a transaction with its writer.

Students are not so certain. They tend to assume that any response which they can remotely connect to the text is fine. Unfortunately they have little experience to bring to their reading and fewer reading strategies. So when we ask them to read a poem or a play or a story or an essay, we should not be surprised when they summarize the plot or "theme."

Although reader-response theory has been popular since the 1970's, signs of its inadequacy have appeared. In 1987 alone three articles appeared in College English which attempted to correct faults of reader-response theory. Brook Thomas suggested that reader-response be expanded to include New Historicism in order to correct students' tendencies to ignore the historical of a work,[2] Jeffrey Porter advocated including the enthymeme as a reading strategy in order to correct misreadings based on logic,[3] and Marjorie Roemer discussed ways to correct problems of authority in the classroom that reader-response fosters.[4] Just as reader-response replaced New Criticism in order to correct its narrowness, reader-response too seems to have drawbacks, among them a tendency to divert students' attention from the text and

to encourage careless reading habits. It also focuses more on sociology than language. We need ways to help students to read texts sensitively, without sacrificing the gains of reader-response, ways which include both reader and writer as active participants in the process of making meaning.

Linda Flower recently observed that experienced readers often use strategies to puzzle out meaning as they read. She concludes, "We need to trace...the connections between the active, constructive cognition of readers and writers and the coherence and structure of texts. And we need to discover new ways to make the strategic knowledge we see in experienced writers and readers more accessible to our students."[5] I begin with figuration because it requires students to perform several difficult operations at once. As they read a figure, they must analyze, draw on previously acquired knowledge, and synthesize constantly. Thus, reading a figure can be a major source of frustration. Figuration is so complex, so difficult to process, that students often overtax their short term memory and their patience.

To help I teach them a heuristic, drawing on linguistics, New Criticism, and rhetorical theory, that gives them a systematic way to proceed. The heuristic has an important advantage: it shows students how language (particularly figuration) influences both writers and readers without denying the validity of multiple readings or the affect of outside knowledge on a given reading. In other words, it moves students

closer to a text by drawing their attention to its language without implying that the text has only one meaning. Because figures themselves are open to multiple interpretation, the heuristic is flexible. Yet it also limits the range of interpretations to those which are consistent with the words in the text.

I call the heuristic the circle of facts, figures, and fictions. It is a circle because reading itself is often recursive: we check and recheck the meanings we make for internal consistency, for wholeness. The three points on the circle are those facts, figures, and fictions which help to create and unify our meanings as we read a poem or story or essay. Figure 1 presents the concept schematically.

Insert Figure 1 About Here

We begin at the point labeled "facts" by reading the text--usually a short poem--all the way through. Our purpose is to gather the facts--to discover as much as we can about the poem's literal level. I suggest that as we read, we look for the pictures, the images we see in our mind's eye, even if the images at this point do not make sense. Why? The best answer I have heard came from a poet-teacher-colleague Paula Scheye. One of her students had written of Yeats' "The Wild Swans at Coole," "Yeats was not talking about a bunch of birds,. . .but contemplating man in the ultimate transition from life to death."

Paula argued, on the contrary, that Yeats was talking about a bunch of birds, that Yeats wrote about swans because they captured his attention: they drew him outside of himself and in that drawing stirred something deep within him that was only known through his absorption, his careful concentration of the swans.

In other words, the concrete images or experiences which appear at the literal level help to shape the whole poem, including what goes on at the figurative level. Poems are not intellectual puzzles; they are the result of far more complex human activity. Unless a reading of a poem treats both literal and figurative as equally important, the reader can easily distort the poem and the reading itself will be neither "probable" nor "workable" nor "fruitful" in anyone's eyes. As we gather the facts and look at the images we find, students develop a strong sense of this inexpressible core at the poem's center.

Once we have looked at the images, even though these do not necessarily make sense, we move on to the figures, the second point on the circle. To teach them how figures work, I use a theory formulated by Owen Thomas. Thomas observed that a "word or phrase is figurative when the definitional matrix of the word, the set of features, has been modified in some way so that it acquires, temporarily and in a particular context, a different and nonliteral meaning."[6]

I explain that Thomas' "set of features" operates in ways like our own genetic configuration which determines our hair and

eye color and to some extent our body shape and strength. Just as our genetic makeup both makes us unique and limits our behavior at the same time, a word's "set of linguistic features" determines that set of rules which governs how a word is used (through its syntactic features) and what it means (through its semantic features). And the semantic features can be either explicit (denotations) or implicit (connotations). To put it another way, the "set of linguistic features" is also a set of "lexical restraints"--"lexical" because these restraints are found in the dictionary and "restraints" because they outline the parameters of ordinary usage.

Thomas then describes a the word acquires its nonliteral meaning: as the set of features is modified, "certain incompatible features are transferred to the definition matrix of another word."[7] Before students can watch features transfer, however, they must be able to identify them. The word 'berry,' for example, has the syntactic features: 'noun,' 'common (noun),''countable,' 'inanimate,' 'organic,' and the denotations (semantic features): 'juicy fruit of certain plants,' 'coffee bean,' and 'fish eggs' (as well as its botanical definition).

Insert Figure 2 Here

We must infer the syntactic features. Making such inferences is often difficult for my students so I show them where the information can be found. The feature 'noun' comes

from the designated part of speech, and I caution them that dictionaries often lump several parts of speech into a single entry. The feature 'common' comes from the fact that the word is not capitalized (except in the OED which doesn't include proper nouns). The syntactic features 'countable' and 'inanimate' are actually hybrids, coming from the semantic features of the word 'berry,' but they are classified as syntactic because they actually determine how 'berry' is used. (An inanimate noun, for example, cannot normally be used as the subject of a verb which takes an animate noun: we ordinarily do not say "The book ran.")

To help students make sure they have all the important syntactic features, I give them a checklist to remind them of the

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Insert Figure 3 Here

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various categories they can look for. I also remind them that while any good dictionary will contain a word's essential syntactic features and its denotations, we usually must supply its connotations from our own knowledge and experience.

It is our inability to determine once and for all which features are transferring and which connotations are operating that enables us to combine close textual analysis with reader-response theory. Let me explain. A figure changes as its context changes: if we say "John is a lion" we could be highlighting his ferocity or his social prowess, depending on the

situation. Yet these multiple meanings are neither infinite nor indeterminate. Readings too have restraints.

Once we have examined the features of "berry," then we create "violations" in order to watch features transfer. In "She's the berries," the features 'juicy' and 'luscious' (a connotation) probably transfer to the "she," indicating that she may be sweet or ripe for the taking. 'Berry' may also be used as an animate subject of a verb as in "Sweet blackberries dance in the sun." Here, the feature 'animate' transfers from the verb back to its subject. 'Berry' can be addressed as a person, as in "O Raspberry, Thy thorny stem hath pricked me." Or 'berry' can be substituted for another word which already has a figurative meaning as in this passage from A Midsummer Night's Dream:

> So we grew together,
> Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,
> But yet an union in partition,
> Two lovely berries moulded on one stem (III, ii, 208).

Notice how subtly this figure develops: assuming that her best friend Hermia has stolen her fiance Demetrius, Helen tries to get Hermia to stop. To convince her, Helen evokes their past friendship in the image of the double cherry. She begins with a literal-metaphorical statement, implying that they grew up together and became alike because they were friends. Then she creates the simile which indicates that the relationship was even closer--like a double cherry. (Sometimes I have to remind my students that two cherries can grow on a single stem, having one

skin, but two stones inside.) By the time Helen reaches the final figure--"Two lovely berries moulded on one stem"--students may think that the image simply restates the earlier figure, but another interpretation is also possible. In the poem the two friends have become "two lovely berries," two interchangeable young women, both beautiful and full of love, both ripe for the picking, both susceptible to the charms of a single man, Demetrius. So Helen's speech could be both plea and warning.

The example reveals that we cannot limit ourselves to a linguistic reading. We have already seen that the context in which the figure occurs determines and controls the feature transfer. In literature, however, we cannot be sure whether the meaning indicated by the immediate context of a figure will be reinforced or contradicted by other figures. (By immediate context here I refer to those words which surround the figure. Usually the immediate context is the sentence in which the figure appears.) Often we must go beyond a single sentence or two to the whole work before we can be sure we've got a reading which preserves the integrity of the text.

I want to make one last point about using Thomas. Although he derives other figures--personification, metonymy, synecdoche, and so on--from his basic description of metaphor as a violation of lexical restraints, I avoid having students name the figures they have found. If they try to classify the figures, they soon get bogged down and lose sight of the way figures work--to my mind the most useful aspect of the heuristic.

Once students understand feature violation and transfer, we turn to a poem to see how the method works. Although I would not choose a poem of this difficulty for beginners, I will use Milton's "Lycidas," here because it contains many different types and various levels of feature transfer. At the outset I would tell students only that Milton was about thirty when he wrote "Lycidas" and that the poem was written as a memorial to one of his classmates who had died suddenly in a boating accident off the coast of Wales. Then I read the opening lines aloud:

> Yet once more, O ye Laurels, and once more
> Ye Myrtles brown, with Ivy never sere,
> I come to pluck your Berries harsh and crude,
> And with forc'd fingers rude
> Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year (1-5).

Even a first reading yields at least one image for most students: the "I" of the poem is in the woods, picking berries from some plants and tearing up their leaves.

To make more sense of the images, my students and I turn to the dictionary. (For poems written before the twentieth century I prefer the OED but we can usually manage with an ordinary dictionary that contains etymologies. At this stage I also supply any obsolete meanings being used.) We look up each noun, adjective, and verb and write down its features. Often I make this a group project in which each student is responsible for a different word. As the class looks at various definitions, they soon realize that poets often use several meanings

simultaneously. In "Lycidas" for example, we soon see that the "leaves" could be both real leaves and the pages of a poem which the "I" must write in memory of his dead friend, a poem which relies on his unripe talents.

Once we have looked up the definitions and described whatever factual images we can, we begin a "figure hunt." In this stanza, students see immediately that by addressing the "Laurels" and "Myrtles" as "ye" the speaker has made them persons. The students also see that "the mellowing year" must be some sort of figure because years do not ordinarily ripen or "mellow." A few students wonder about "shattering leaves" since most leaves are not brittle except in the fall, but I tell them that in Milton's day, "shatter" meant "scatter."

Even these figures fail to explain the "once more," however, and we still do not know why the speaker is out in the woods picking berries when he is supposed to be mourning a dead friend or why he mentions the laurels, myrtles, and ivy rather than elms, oaks, and maples. At this point, we move on to the third point in the circle, the fictions, even though we know we will have to return to the first and second points, the facts and figures, soon. Often, one of my students remembers that in the definitions of laurels, myrtles, and ivy, we learned that they are evergreens and that Milton has even reminded us that the ivy is "never sere," an anagram for evergreen. I usually have to explain that evergreens are a symbol for immortality and that laurels were used in ancient Greece and Rome to crown winners--

both in athletic and in poetry contests. (Later, I teach the students to discover this information for themselves, but at this point I am content if they have begun to realize that they sometimes have to go beyond the dictionary and their own store of knowledge--perhaps to an encyclopedia for information.)

Using what we have found, we begin to assemble a tentative reading of the lines. The speaker of the poem has come to the laurels, myrtles, and ivy for something, addressing them respectfully as though they were persons having something to give him. We keep in mind that these plants are all evergreen and that they probably have something to do with mortality, but the speaker does not treat them as immortal. Instead, he plucks their berries and scatters their leaves. How destructive! Are his the actions of a person seeking favors or a person who is angry? Maybe the answer lies in the figures themselves.

As the laurels, myrtles, and ivy could stand both for immortality and persons, my students and I reason, their berries and leaves are probably figures too. Berries, as we know, are the "fruits" of the plants--but if the plants are symbols of immortality, then the fruits must also be immortal in some way. Suppose Milton is using "berries" here as someone might use "fruits" in the phrase "the fruits of one's labors." In this passage, then, since the laborers (the Laurels, Myrtles, and Ivy) are immortal, their labors must result in products (fruits and leaves) that seem immortal. What are the "fruits of the

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immortals?" Perhaps these fruits are like ideas or poems that are inspired by eternal or immortal beings.

Even the speaker's use of "pluck" seems to confirm this, for just as one can pick or pluck berries, so can one pluck the strings of a lyre, creating music. In ancient times, moreover, most poems were meant to be sung and accompanied by a stringed instrument rather than spoken. Perhaps, too, the leaves are both the leaves of plants and the leaves of the books which will contain the poem.

To summarize, then, the figures seem to indicate that the speaker of the poem has gone to the best natural symbols of excellence and immortality he has--the laurels and myrtles, and ivy--in order to gather ideas for a poem which he must publish soon, before the year mellows or time runs out. Otherwise, he will seem not to have cared for his friend. Probably he feels insecure about his poem because his gift for poetry has not fully ripened and he doesn't feel able to do his friend justice.

Once my students have tried making sense of the figures, we move to the larger fictions, the thematic strands which weave the poem together as a whole. This step comes directly from New Criticism, but we are also doing what we have already done with words and sentences, this time on a larger scale.

To begin, I like to review four assumptions New Critics make, though I will not here explain them the way I do to my students. First, each individual figure contributes in some way to the overall meaning of the poem, i.e. all figures should

connect into unified, complex meanings just as, on another level, all words should connect meaningfully in a single sentence. Second, individual figures often combine into figurative patterns which convey larger meanings--sometimes different, sometimes expanded from those of the original figures which constitute them. Third, the poet can use several contradictory patterns of figures to create tension within the poem. The poet resolves this tension at the end of the poem by showing how the apparent contradictions are really complementary. (Notice that these assumptions tend to recapitulate the process Thomas describes but on a larger scale: rather than words interacting to create figures, we see figures interacting to create larger figures. Moreover, we find that just as feature violations create a figure, causing some features to transfer from one word to another, so the apparent contradictions between figurative patterns create new perceptions, new ways to relate the patterns to each other.) Finally we notice that context controls figuration at all levels.

As we continue to read "Lycidas," for example, we discover there are lots of words associated with the word "sheep"--flock, shepherd, shears, herd, sheep hook, the Lamb's high feast, and so on. But these "sheep" words often seem to contradict each other. Some shepherds play "rural ditties" on "the Oaten flute" while others play "lean and flashy songs" which "grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw." And though the speaker and his companion Lycidas--who bears the same name as a Greek

shepherd in mythology, by the way--batten or nourish their flocks with "the fresh dews of night," St. Peter refers to other hungry sheep who "look up and are not fed" by their masters.

How do we resolve the contradictions? First we learn to examine each figure in the light of the context of the whole poem. This context I label the "text" to distinguish it from the immediate context we talked about earlier and from the external context we will discuss soon. The text's boundary thus encloses the poem or story itself: everything within this boundary is likely to be related in some way to everything else. Thus I teach students to look within the text for the patterns among the figures. In "Lycidas," shepherds form two groups: good ones who take care of their sheep and evil ones who don't. But we do not yet know what distinguishes good from bad, and we have yet to discover what the shepherds have to do with writing an elegy.

To help students find the answers to these problems, we return to the circle once again, moving to the area where the fictions merge once again into facts. This time we gather more facts from the external context for "Lycidas"--going beyond the dictionary to literary and Judeo-Christian traditions. It is important, for example, to know something about the knowledge Milton shared with his contemporaries. If a student reads "Lycidas" without knowing that the whole business with the shepherds is based on Christ's words, "I am the Good Shepherd" and that Classical poets were by convention also shepherds, s/he may misunderstand the elegy's resolution. Students are too

likely to think that Milton and Edward King actually worked as shepherds, earning their way through school, the way today's students earn their college tuition by waiting tables.

In the past, New Critics rightly insisted on the unity of a literary text, assuming that it is a seamless whole. This assumption had some unfortunate consequences, however. The New Critics failed to realize that many of us were confusing the theoretical concept of unity and coherence with the New Critical method of reading texts. We assumed that we should never go to outside sources for information which might clarify what we read. Yes, texts do have unity, but the twentieth century is not the seventeenth and the 1980's are not the 1950's. To see the unity in a seventeenth century text like "Lycidas," a reader has to become a student of the seventeenth century. The reader must be able to understand the world view of the poem before s/he can see its unity. For example, in Milton's time more than today, many people believed that God created and continually intervened in the day-to-day operation of the world. Today we no longer believe that God has hidden messages in rocks and trees for us to find. Instead, we explain natural phenomena in scientific terms. In Milton's day, there was no science as we know it; his contemporaries had not even been fully convinced that the Ptolemaic conception of the universe was wrong. Accepting Copernican cosmology meant giving up our traditional position at the center of the universe, a position assumed by the Bible. The unity in "Lycidas" depends on our assuming a Ptolemaic universe.

Once students realize this, they begin to see purposes behind Milton's methods. They begin to realize that there is no literal base of the poem--in the sense that Milton and King were never shepherds. Instead, the speaker has established shepherding as a metaphorical base--carrying with it all the sensory images we would require in a literal level today. Then the "I" refigures the shepherds simultaneously as pastoral poets (using the Classical tradition) and as clergymen (using the Christian tradition). From there, we see that if "shepherd" has three meanings, then their "flocks" must be simultaneously sheep, the audience for poetry, and the congregation of a church. Finally, the students see how the two larger categories--the good shepherds and the evil shepherds--circumscribe the others. At this point, my students ask, "Why did Milton go to all that trouble? Why not just say what he meant and get on with it?"

The answer to this question can be found in another area of the external context I teach students to examine: the rhetorical effects the poem achieves. Of course, very few poets intend to persuade their readers the way orators and politicians try to persuade us. A poet doesn't want to get us to vote or to buy a product--except in a special sense. In A Rhetoric of Motives, Kenneth Burke put it best: "Whenever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is 'meaning,' there is persuasion."[8] The poet, then, is not trying to persuade us to act, but to believe, to test his vision in a very real, deeply felt sense. In "Lycidas" the speaker is not only groping his way

through the confusion he feels at his friend's death but leading us as well. And when he realizes that Lycidas has ascended to Heaven, he is convincing us too, through the figures he uses, figures that are so completely interwoven that they seem to embody God's great design for the universe.

I also show my students that the speaker uses figuration to increase the effectiveness of other rhetorical devices, the ethos of his character, for instance. We believe him because we see his humility in the first stanza: he is concerned that his fingers are "rude" and that the "berries," the ideas he has, are still "harsh" and "crude." We see his anger at Lycidas' death and his naivete in his assumption that Lycidas has died at the hands of capricious fates. Finally, we see his continued humility and renewed hope in his self-portrait as the "uncouth swain" at the end of the poem.

My students also discover that the speaker uses a figurative form of logos, to appeal to our reason and experience, to convince us that Lycidas is not dead. In the most complex stanza toward the end of the poem, we find the justification for the speaker's belief in the poem's images of transcendence. Having equated Lycidas' "sinking" with death and destruction, with Orpheus' unfortunate visit to Hades to retrieve Eurydice and his subsequent death by water, with the evils that the corrupt clergymen have sunk to, and with the location of Edward King's death, the speaker now reveals the true nature of this sinking:

> Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more
> For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead,
> Sunk though he be beneath the watry floor,
> So sinks the day-star in the Ocean bed,
> And yet anon repairs his drooping head,
> And tricks his beams, and with new spangled Ore,
> Flames in the forehead of the morning sky:
> So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high,
> Through the dear might of him that walked the waves
> (165-173).

Like Christ's descent into Hell and like the sun's setting in the ocean each night, Lycidas' sinking is a necessary part of God's plan. If we check some of the Biblical references, we find that all the apparent contradictions--good and evil, light and darkness, and rising and sinking--have become linked figuratively in the single word "day-star" which refers simultaneously to the actual sun, to Phoebus the Classical god of the sun, and to Christ, the Son of God. In other words, if we accept the assumptions Milton does--that Christ died to redeem mankind and that in nature one finds the message of Christ's redemption in the setting and rising of the sun--then it is not so great a leap to believe that Lycidas, who has duplicated the actions of Christ and the sun, must have risen to heaven.

As they learn how to gather the facts, to make sense of the figures, to discover the fictions, and then to return to the facts once more, students begin to see how complex making meaning

really is. Only when they have grappled with this complexity do they see what Martin Joos meant when he described what great writers and rewriters do:

> The [great writer] is as one who packs his thought for a long journey. Having packed the garment, he does not merely straighten out the folds and close the paragraph. Instead, he unpacks completely and repacks again. And again; and again and again. Each time, he tucks just one more thought into this or that pocket. When he quits, there are more of them than words. So many labors of love on a single sentence, that many rewards for the rereader. On the surface, one teasing half-reward; others at successively greater and greater depths, so that each reading finds one more.[9]

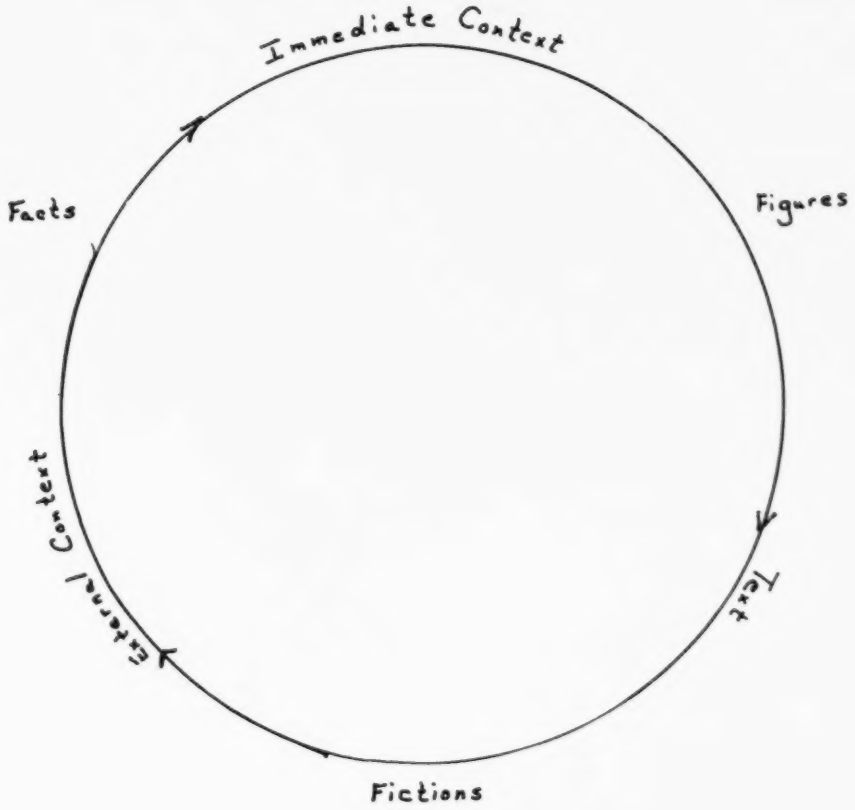
The purpose of the heuristic, then, is not to exhaust the possibilities for reading a poem or a story--that would be impossible with literature worth rereading--but to help students learn the pleasure of reading literature, the pleasure of making a reading that is "probable, workable, and fruitful," that is a true response rather than a contemplation of self. Above all, though, the purpose of this circle of facts, figures, and fictions is to help students enjoy the surface of the poem or story and at the same time to taste the fullest joys of its language the way Galway Kinnell enjoys blackberries:

> as I stand among them
> lifting the stalks to my mouth, the ripest berries

fall almost unbidden to my tongue,
as words sometimes do, certain peculiar words
like strengths or squinched,
many-lettered, one-syllabled lumps,
which I squeeze, squinch open, and splurge well.[10]

Figure 1

Schematic Diagram of the Heuristic



Facts interact to become figures within the immediate context (usually the sentence).
Figures interact to become fictions within the text (within the confines of the work as a whole).
Fictions are tested, affirmed, and/or illuminated within the external context (the social-political-linguistic-cultural milieu in which the work is written and read).

Figure 2

Definition of 'Berry'

Berry (be·ri) sb Found with some variety of form in all the Teutonic langs:....The ulterior history is uncertain: *basjon- has been conjecturally referred to *bazo-z BARE (q.v.), as if a bare or uncovered fruit, also to the root represented by Skr. bhas- to eat

1. Any small globular or ovate juicy fruit, not having a stone; in O.E. chiefly applied to the grape; in mod. popular use, embracing the gooseberry, raspberry, bilberry, and their congeners, as well as the strawberry, mulberry, fruit of the elder, rowantree, cornel, honey-suckle, buckthorn, privet, holly, mistletoe, ivy, yew,. . .laurel, mezereon, and many exotic shrubs; also sometimes the bird-cherry or 'hag-berry,' the haw, and hip of the rose...

b. loosely A coffee 'bean.'

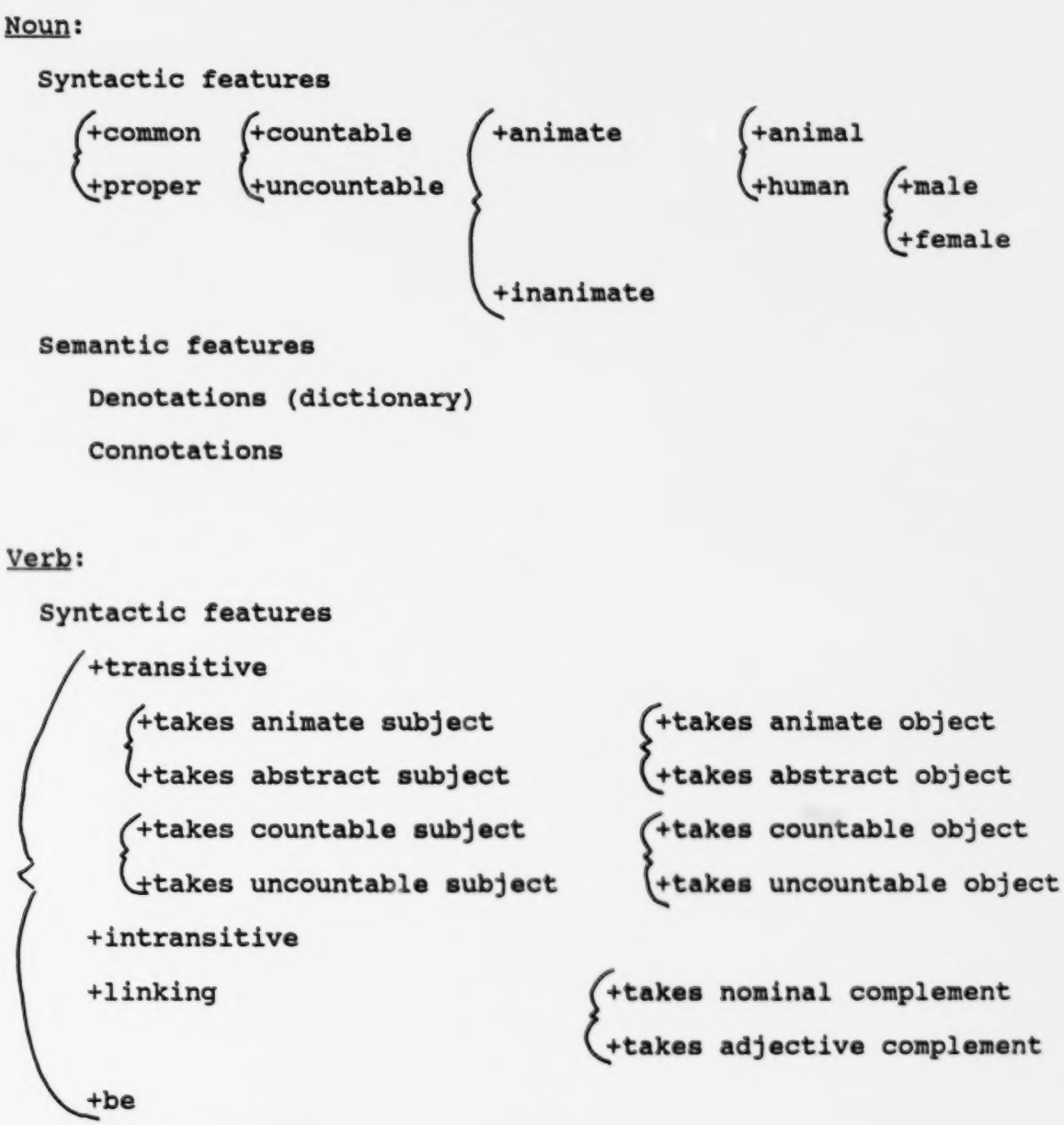
2. Bot. A many-seeded inferior pulpy fruit, the seeds of which are, when mature, scattered through the pulp; called also bacca. In this sense, many of the fruits popularly so called, are not berries: the grape, gooseberry and currants, the bilberry, mistletoe berry, and potato fruit, are true berries.

3. One of the eggs in the roe of a fish; also, the eggs of a lobster. A hen lobster carrying her eggs is said to be in berry.

-------Oxford English Dictionary, 1971

Figure 3

Checklist of Lexical Features



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6. Owen Thomas, Metaphor and Related Subjects, Random House, p. 55.

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9. Martin Joos, The Five Clocks: A Linguistic Excursion into the Five Styles of English Usage, Harcourt Brace, 1961, p. 43.

10. Galway Kinnell, Selected Poems, Houghton Mifflin, 1982, p. 130.